DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 467 UD 018 007

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TITLE Using the Urban Setting as the Educational Lab.
PUB DATE 20 Nov 77
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Conference on Urban Education (3rd, Norfolk, Virginia, November 20, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aurally Handicapped; Change Agents; *Changing Attitudes; *Handicapped; Higher Education; Physically Handicapped; *Rehabilitation Counseling; *Role Perception; *Student Attitudes; *Undergraduate Students; Urban Areas; Visually Handicapped

ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes an undergraduate course in rehabilitation counseling. Initially students taking the course learned the prescribed material, but they were unaware of what a person with a particular disabling condition looked like, felt like, or how the public treated that person. As a result, the course extended itself to the real world; specifically it used as its lab several urban shopping centers. This learning project and experimental program followed a pre-post test design. After the baseline data was obtained, each student was to "play a specific condition." Some were in wheelchairs, others had their eyes covered with bandages, and some simulated hearing problems. The results indicate that there was a large change on pre to post test measures. (Author/AM)

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ng the Urban Setting as the Educational Lab

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ED151467

A Paper Presented at the 3rd Annual National Conference on Urban Education, Norfolk, VA, November 20, 1977

The transfer of learning from the lab to the real setting is not usually totally complete. This is well documented. One can increase this transfer by making the lab setting more similar to the real world. One of the major problems associated with teaching topics pertaining to counseling in the urban setting and practicing the related skills is that the classroom and the research lab can in no manner simulate the multi stimuli producing real world. That is not new. We have known this for years and even developed statistics and research procedures which will attempt to account for some of the variables which are lost by conducting research in the experimental lab. In addition, training in the classroom or training lab is drastically different and more predictable than training which goes on in the real world of society. It is not inferior training but should not be considered necessarily similar. The transferrer of learning from the laboratory to real life is certainly a documented problem.

Although some research and training programs are attempting to develop more outreach training and research, the difficulty of doing so has caused most counselor training programs to conduct most training in the classroom or university lab. Usually the outreach training is attempted only after the campus work is finished

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i.e. practicum or pre-practicum experience. Research is either conducted in the university lab or classroom, or conducted on the final results in the field. Little is done to evaluate the effects of off campus experience during training.

With this in mind, this educator prepared a program to take counselor education students into the real world of opinions and prejudice. Old Dominion University offers an undergraduate program in rehabilitation counseling. The course I was teaching was CHARACTERISTICS OF DISABLING CONDITIONS. Basically the course was suppose to introduce the student to the various conditions which Rehabilitation and Community Counselors would expect to see.

After several tests I became aware that although these students were learning the material about the disabling conditions and were able to answer the questions on the tests, they were unaware of what a person with that condition looked like, felt like, or how the public really treated that person. As a result I decided to take the class to the real world. My learning lab was waiting in one of the many Urban Shopping centers in the Tidewater area.

A summary of the learning project and the experimental program follows the usual pre-post test design. Students were evaluated using a self made questionnaire to determine their perception of how well they would accept a person with a specific condition and how well they thought they would accept the condition if they had it. On a Saturday during the first part of December, 1976, all the class met at the shopping center to conduct the experiment. The students were divided into triads. They would work in pairs, one simulating the disabling condition, one as a helper, and the

third being the observer/recorder. They first took a baseline of frequencies of eye contact during three random five minute sessions, while casually walking in the mall. They also took a count of the average length of time it took to get waited on in the store. After the baseline data was obtained, each student was to "play a specific condition". Some were in wheelchairs, others had their eyes covered with bandages, and some were fixed to have hearing problems. The same data was recorded on all triads. In addition, after the data was recorded, each student was given a task to perform which was difficult due to the simulated limitations. The students in the wheelchairs were told to get a drink of water from the fountain. The students who were visually restricted were to buy something in a store. The ones who had auditory restriction had to make a phone call. In addition each student was required to wait in one line while having the condition assigned to him/her.

The results were most interesting. While there is no doubt of the many problems with the experimental design, the purpose of their study was not to report experimental results but rather to encourage such simulated experiences. The results indicated that there was a large change on pre to post tests measures. Significance was found at the .05 level for all triads. Students originally had seen themselves as being very accepting of others with disabling conditions and felt they could adjust to the condition if it happened to them. After the simulated experience in the shopping mall, they had greatly reduced their perceived ability to adjust to the condition if it happened to them and more importantly they had reduced their acceptance of others who had the condition.

Although each student played only one disabling condition, they were evaluated on all three (WHEELCHAIR, HEARING IMPAIRED, AND VISUAL IMPAIRED). This reduction in acceptance was found in all areas but was only significant in the area where they had played the role. In other words, they needed to experience the condition to effect the change.

There was also a significant change in the frequency of eye contacts and in the length of time taken to be waited on. Both showed that when the same person is seen as normal vs. disabled, he/she gets more eye contacts and has to wait a shorter time to be waited on.

The purpose of this paper is not to report a study on Rehabilitation Counseling research but rather to indicate that learning about people in the university must also go off the campus and into the real world of prejudice, pain, and poverty. These students disclosed to me that this experience had awakened them in the reality that the condition was not the important aspect of the course, but that they really needed to study the whole person - how he lives, gets around, makes a living, etc.